

The portrayal of Human Feelings through Animal Imagery: A Study of The Select Poems of Kamala Das

Mr. Pamoli Nandy
PhD., Research Scholar
Bankura University, Bankura, West Bengal, INDIA.

Abstract

Kamala Das is one of the important women writers in Indian English Literature and her contribution to develop women writings is undoubtedly great. Her poetry acquires such an important place not only in India but also in the whole world that there is no bound of research work in the literary world. Ample usage of images is an important characteristic of her poetry. All these images are used to express her inner feelings of oppression, dissatisfaction, unhappiness and subjugation. She uses different images for different feelings which show her craftsmanship in poetry. To express male aggression and ferociousness she uses the image of a lion because a lion is the king of a jungle where he preys according to his own will and other animals become helpless victims at his greedy paws. Das finds a similarity between her husband and a lion and so she uses this figurative language. On the other hand to express female subordination and meekness she uses the image of a dove, swallow and dog as these birds are easy to be tamed by its master. Likewise, a husband easily tames his wife in married life. By using all these images to reveal her personal feelings she displays her boldness and frankness which is of course praiseworthy. This article attempts to focus on the images of animals, birds and reptiles used in her poems like “The Old Playhouse”, “The Stone Age”, “The Freaks”, “An Introduction” etc which show her protest against the male domination and help her to describe female marginalization.

Keywords: Kamala Das, poetry, imagery, female oppression, male domination, personal life.

Introduction

Kamala Das, a dazzling personality in the constellation of poetic talents in Indian English Literature, comes from the Southern Malabar in Kerala. Her writing pattern is similar to that of many American poets like Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and others whom the critic M.L. Rosenthal calls as confessional poets. In her writings, she creates no barrier between her inner self and the outward representation of that self. Her poetry reveals a deep subjectivism and autobiographical notes presenting her anguished, deprived and disappointed inner self. She chooses the medium of poetry to provide language to her hidden feelings. A. N. Dwivedi rightly states:

There is too much of anguish and suffering in the verse of Kamala Das. It colours her poetic body through and through. The adverse circumstances have rendered her vision tragic and melancholy, - her upbringing by careless parents, her marriage with an egoistic and vainglorious man, her disappointment in love, and her illicit love-affairs with other men in order to remove her boredom and anxiety. (42)

Having a strong sensitive heart, Kamala Das gives voice to her feminine sense perceptions not only in her works of verses but also in her works of essays. She does not tread back to present a picture-perfect

description of her feminine expectations, demands and frustration. Again, I am quoting the opinion of Dwivedi:

As a poet of sharp feminine sensibility, Kamala Das gives vent to the hopes, fears and desires of womankind. She has been the champion of woman's cause in all her writings, and there is no point in challenging this statement which amounts to an altruism. (114)

Kamala Das uses imagery in her poetry with great artistry is known to all. Imagery is used in literature for both of these purposes – decoration and aesthetic pleasure. A poet takes the help of an image to provide a concrete form to his/her abstract ideas. It is very helpful to make a connection between the writer's inner feelings with the outer world. According to Abrams, "Commonly in recent usage, imagery signifies figurative language, especially the vehicles of metaphors and similes" (121). In the poetry of Kamala Das, we can easily find ample usage of imagery which is very much suggestive and full of connotations. She uses various types of animal and bird imagery like a lion, a dog, a cat, a dove, a pigeon, a swallow etc. Besides, she also makes references to reptiles like lizard and snake. Dr. Sunita B. Nimavat opines about the importance of imagery in Das's poetry in this manner:

They are not mere outward decorations but deeply suggestive and psychological. They are drawn from the familiar and the commonplace. They reveal the personal life of the poet. Her love longing, frustrations, vacuity, agony and anguish are expressed through the images and symbols. (37)

To understand the depth of her poetry firstly we should know about her personal life and the images used by the poetess. In this article, I want to examine how these images used by the poetess are helpful to us to get a concrete shape of her inner feelings and emotions. Here, I endeavour to emphasize the female subjugation presented through various images.

In the poem "The Old Playhouse" the poetess metaphorically finds a similarity of her self with a swallow. Here, this image of a swallow is used to show an objective co-relation of the pathetic condition of her married life. In the words of M.H Abrams, an objective correlative is "the vogue of Eliot's concept of an outer correlative for inner feelings... (197)". The inner feelings of Das about subjugation and oppression get outer expression through the image of a swallow which is migratory and cannot be tamed like a pet bird. In their married life her husband wants to control her life and desire, but she asserts her untamable nature. Das expresses her inner pangs of heart in this way in this poem:

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone and the homes left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
Pathways of the sky. (30)

In the male-dominated society, no woman is given the opportunity of doing according to her own will and she has to sacrifice all her desires for freedom only because of her gender identity which is out and out a social and cultural construction. Women are not allowed, especially after marriage in Indian societal structure, to spend her life as they wish and they have to accept her husband's choice to be confined in the four walls of his room: "Your room is / always lit by artificial lights, your windows, always shut" (30).

For this claustrophobic nature of married life most of the feminist critics like Simone de Beauvoir, Christine Delphy were against the traditional system of marriage in our society which is directed by male-desire. This bird image reveals the sad plight of the life of the poetess in particular and it also shows how a woman has to adopt meek and reticent nature which is considered as feminine qualities by the traditional thought system. This bird image proves Das's strong consciousness of the patriarchal structure of the society where she lives in. Here, it is worthy to quote the words of Ashapura Devi translated in the essay "Indian Women: Myth and Reality":

It is as if men were born to rule and the women to be ruled. All social norms and interactions between man and woman perpetuate this ruler- subject relation, and the roots of this prejudice spread far back into prehistory. (20)

In the poem "The Stone Age" Das again becomes critical about her husband's behaviour which is intolerable to her. Here, she is bold enough to compare her husband to a spider which is very harmful for human beings. She is married to an aged person who is doubly old than she is and so she uses the adjective "old" to describe her husband. Another adjective "fat" implies that before marriage he has many experiences of sexual relationships and so like a spider he is fattened by the earlier preys. A spider weaves its web to catch its prey and if a prey once enters into its web there is no escape from this dangerous trap. Likewise, her husband traps her physically to satisfy his bodily desire and she becomes a helpless prey. She becomes bewildered by her husband's webs of carnal appetite. The lines of the poem continue in this way:

Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind,
Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment,
Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite
Dove, you build around me a shabby drawing room, (67)

By portraying this imagery of the spider Das argues about the dominating nature of her husband who is concerned only with his desire and his satisfaction, not bothering about his wife's feelings and appetite. Like every ordinary woman of our society, she gets no opportunity to express her demands and always has to remain as a property of her husband. Women have no space of their own and are forced to be caged in the home having no scope to go to the outside world. Before marriage, they are controlled by their parents. She would be a good daughter if she obeys her parents and their desires and then she would be a good wife if she does not protest against her husband's dominating and overpowering attitude. In this occasion I should quote the statement of Virginia Woolf in her groundbreaking text *A Room of One's Own* (1929):

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. (45)

In the same poem, the poetess calls her husband "a lion" because of his ferocious nature. A lion is the king of the jungle and he catches his prey according to his own will. Similarly, she becomes the poor

victim at the lion-like paws of her husband. During their copulation, her husband's physical embrace seems to her as serpentine because it is devoid of emotion and love. To describe the venomous effect of this serpentine physical embrace Das brings the imagery of "a hooded snake". Not only voicelessness is imposed on a woman in domestic life, but she has also no right to voice against the cruelty during sexual intercourse with her husband. So, it can be opined that in this male-dominated society women have to remain voiceless in every sphere of life.

This snake image is visible again in the poem "The Freaks" but having different implication. Here also the poetess raises her voice to describe her feelings of dissatisfaction and disappointment in her married life. She expects from her husband emotion and love which will satisfy her desire of heart, but her husband only produces "Skin's lazy hungers". Getting no fulfillment of her heart's desire for love, her heart becomes "an empty cistern" and this symbolizes her psychological emptiness. After waiting for a long time and not receiving any emotional treatment from her husband her heart becomes filled with "coiling snakes of silence" (48). So, here Das uses the snake image to describe the silent condition of her heart.

In the poem "A Losing Battle" Das refers to a lioness and this image of a lioness is not to describe her own self but a rival woman with whom her husband becomes sexually engaged. In the poem, "The Stone Age" she already compares her husband with a wild lion to express his ferociousness and now this woman is perfectly compared to a lioness because of her lust and wildness in sexual activity. This woman is very compatible with her husband because both of them know the only desire of body and none of them is concerned of love like the poetess herself. So, this is an exceptional animal image used to refer to a woman who falls in the same category of men in her carnal desire. Unlike the poetess, this woman like a wild lioness uses the trap of sex and her husband becomes an easy prey to "the cheapest bait of all" (48). Instead, the poetess uses the trap of love and the result is only tears and silence. For this, it seems to the poetess that she has lost the battle of winning her husband and this rival woman wins the game by using her body, the most desirable object to her husband.

In the poem "pigeons" Das uses the image of the bird of the title itself. Traditionally pigeon is taken as the symbol of peace and love. But here, she speaks of an afternoon dream of her own and in her afternoon dream, she visualizes that the pigeons are sitting silently and this sight is a strange one. So, this silent state of the pigeons may symbolize that they are no longer the messengers of love and peace in the life of the poetess. These lines of the poem connote the absence of love and peace in her life: "Pigeons on the ledge / Of an afternoon dream / Sit strangely silent" (70).

Another important poem is "The Dance of the Eunuchs" where the poetess portrays the pathetic picture of the alienated life of the eunuchs who are ill-treated in the heterosexual society. Their biological impotence leads them to live a society excluded life. They cannot conform to the expectations of the traditional society and their gender identity is different from the masculinity and femininity and that is why they are kept marginalized and heterosexual identity remains at the centre. To display their strangeness and their vacant life Das uses uncanny and unusual images of "the urine of lizards and mice" (70). Here, the natural cawing of the crows has also stopped: "Even the crows were so / Silent on trees..." (70) The unnatural silence of the crows signifies the unnaturalness of the eunuchs in the eyes of the traditional society. Here, the poetess realizes the poor condition of the eunuchs with whom she finds a similarity in her psychological vacuity.

Her another famous poem is “*An Introduction*” where Das divulges the inner pangs of her life and raises her voice against the traditional expectations from a girl. As she was born and brought up in Malabar in Kerala, it is the convention that she would write only in her mother-tongue Malayalam. But surprisingly she starts to write in English, a foreign language and this choice invites the critical attention of the then society. In this poem, she asks the “critics, friends, visiting cousins” to leave her alone and to write spontaneously according to her own will. She confesses that she can express her joys, her longings and her hopes in English which comes from her heart naturally. To prove her naturalness with the English language she takes the help of animal imagery again. She compares her spontaneity and naturalness in writing in the English language with the cawing of the crows and the roaring of the lions: “ [...] it is useful to me as cawing / Is to crows or roaring to the lions” (96).

“*Love*” is another short but beautiful poem written by Kamala Das, who is hailed as a poet of love. Many Indian English writers like Pritish Nandy, Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan write about love, but her artistry goes beyond all of them. In this poem, she presents two different pictures before and after falling in love. Before falling in love she composed poems and she also painted many pictures which highlight her creative and artistic selfhood. She lived a liberal life and spent times with her friends. But after falling in love this free life leaves her and she has to be confined in the boundary of the four walls of his home. She is forced to be contented with him forgetting her artistic self and her old friends. To emphasize this restricted and boring life Das brings the image of an aged mongrel dog. So, here also this animal image is used to show the unhappy and stagnant married life: “Now that I love you, / curled like an old mongrel / my life lies, content / in you...” (101).

Thus, in the poetry of Kamala Das, these images are used to amplify the inward ideas of the poetess vividly. These ideas are sometimes about unhappy married life, sometimes about female subordination and sometimes about the hostile society in general. Through all these animals, birds and reptiles images Das draws the crystal clear pictures of women subjugation and oppression in this male-dominated society and these images become the mediums of confessing her own dissatisfied and disappointed married life from where she wants an escape to find her mental satisfaction, but unfortunately, her cravings for true love and psychological happiness remain unfulfilled.

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